



# Entr'acte

The Opera  
Supers of  
Iowa City  
Newsletter

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## Letter from the Editor

The responses to my last letter-from-the-editor have been encouraging in that there are a number of readers who share my views about concert attendance. The interesting thing is that these reactions have been expressed personally, face-to-face or by phone, often by a third party rather than by anyone writing to the editor. Is it possible that one of the readers will prepare an article on this topic for the newsletter ?

Only a few Supers attended the concert given by the Iowa Vocal Arts Ensemble on Sunday afternoon, January 29th. Surely most of you were not at the matinee performance of *Les Miz*. And the Super Bowl was not on until evening. Well, you missed a great concert featuring a rarely given work of Brahms, the *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, Op 52 for vocal quartet and piano, four-hands as well as vocal ensembles (duets, quartets, etc.) from operas by Verdi, Nicolai, Rossini and Bizet. The Iowa Vocal Ensemble consisted of Kristie Tigges, soprano, Marcia Roberts and Katherine Eberle, mezzo-sopranos, Scott McCoy, tenor and Stephen Swanson, baritone. Their piano accompanists were Thomas Christensen and David Gompfer. If we are privileged to have another recital by this group, more Supers should attend. Be alert to listings of faculty recitals in local papers from time to time and The School of Music bulletins on Concert & Recital Series, issued quarterly. Then there are the required recitals given by voice students in Harper Hall open to the public (which includes Supers). You can get listings in advance of scheduled recitals by contacting Mona Shaw. Every once in a while, a graduate student or recent graduate of the University opera program will give a recital in one of the local churches. These may be listed in local papers or publicized by the recitalist. Thus, for opera and vocal arts lovers (as the Supers are self-defined to be), there are more opportunities to hear singers in Iowa City than is commonly realized. Sure, most are young, unfinished voices of students but this is the opportunity for you to hear new talent in the making, and to follow their progress over a period of time. Also, the developing vocalists need the experience of singing before an audience that can encourage and support their efforts. Besides, it's *fun* to attend these recitals. Despite my frequent sarcastic remarks about looking for fun in everything, I am not against attending a music event for the fun of it!

— Arthur Canter

## Report of Meetings and Activities

The Opera Theater recital on the afternoon of December 4, 1994 went very well. The Supers held a reception for the participants and audience after the performance. It too was well attended and much appreciated by the students.

The Supers meeting on the next day, December 5th, had a smaller group than usual. Reports were given about the record sale held at the Main Library which netted an additional \$156.00 to the Music Library Gift Fund. The rest of the meeting was devoted to discussions about facilities on the campus and in town for operatic recitals and staging. The meeting adjourned early for a showing of the second set of slides that Patrick Nefzger made during his visit to the Ukraine.

The first meeting of the new year, Monday, January 23d. was well attended. We learned about forthcoming appearances in Europe by Michele Crider and some of the Supers making plans to attend Michele's performance at La Scala. Margaret Wenk informed the group about the status of staging and costuming plans for *Aleko* and *Yolanta*. The budget is very limited this year and with a drop-off in student help there will be a greater need for volunteers to assist. Beaumont Glass related the amazing story about the difficulties, obstacles and intrigue involved in getting the *Aleko* orchestra parts from Russia. This story in itself is like an opera buffa and is



worthy of publication. Professor Glass, in response to questions, gave the group synopses of the two Spring operas and discussed their origins.

The meeting adjourned for the usual refreshments after deciding on the next meeting date: Monday, February 20th.

### **Sergei Rachmaninov and *Aleko***

*—Ah, Rachmaninov, how many ways should we spell thee? Rachmaninoff? Rakhmaninov? Which transliteration of a Russian name best approximates the Russian sounds of the spoken name? It ordinarily makes no difference in understanding our objective, but when it comes to locating Russian names on a computer for a literature search, or a spell-check, you have to know the variants. If some of these have been derived from French sources, as has been the case for Chaikovskii you may be stymied if you search by a "Tch" rather than by a "Ch"! —Ed.*

It should be of interest to the readers, and an additional enticement to attend the University of Iowa Opera Theater's presentation of Rachmaninov's 1893 opera *Aleko*, to know that it will be the first complete performance put on in this country since 1926. According to the **Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera, 2d edition**, *Aleko* was first performed in the U.S.A on January 11, 1926, at "Jolson's Theater" in New York, with "La Touche, Saratovsky and Ignatiev" in the cast. The conductor was not specified and it is not indicated whether the performance was fully staged or not. There is reason to believe it was not. Thus it may well be that our UI Opera will be giving the American premiere of the fully staged and costumed *Aleko*. In any event, the opera has been rarely performed

What happened to render *Aleko* into almost obscurity? The obvious answer would be that it is minor work by a composer not known for his operas. But let us go deeper into the background of the composer and the history and fate of this work and his other operatic endeavors.

Rachmaninov was born into an aristocratic family but the family fortune was lost by his wastrel father while Sergei was still a boy. The loss of wealth may have actually contributed to Rachmaninov's development as a professional musician—pianist, conductor and composer—for in the latter part of the 19th century the son of a rich nobleman was unlikely to be allowed to aim for a career as a musician. His father was a fine amateur musician and capable pianist but it was his mother who encouraged Sergei to prepare himself for a musical career as it became evident that the boy was quite talented. At age 15, he entered the Moscow Conservatory where he studied under Anton Arensky (1861-1906) and one of Tchaikovsky's former pupils, Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915). At the Moscow Conservatory he met Tchaikovsky, then literally the city's musical hero, and was able to impress the old master who served as one of the examiners for Rachmaninov's graduation exercises in 1892.

There were two elements in Rachmaninov's experiences as a youth that need to be understood to appreciate his musical compositions. One is religion and the other is gypsy music. His grandmother used to take him to services in the cathedrals of Novgorod and St. Petersburg where the chanting of church choirs of the Orthodox Church left an indelible impression on him. He would frequent other churches and sit through the whole of the liturgy and attend a monastery to listen to the ancient chants sung by the monks. While a student at the Conservatory, he also developed a penchant for gypsy music, often having supper at a restaurant where he could listen to the singing of gypsies. The fashionable Moscow restaurants at the time had gypsy musicians and famous singers of gypsy songs as attractions. One of Rachmaninov's teachers at the Conservatory, Nikolay Zverev, was particularly influential in propounding elements of gypsy music to his students.

*Aleko* was Rachmaninov's graduation piece. It was an assignment given to the three Moscow Conservatory students qualified to graduate. They were to compose a work to the libretto by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943), dramatist of the Moscow Art Theater, based on Pushkin's dramatic poem "*The Gypsies*". Rachmaninov could hardly wait to get started once he learned of the nature of the libretto. He took less than twenty-four days to complete the task, well ahead of his two classmates, and future life-long friends, Nikita Morozov and Lev Konyus. Their settings were never published. *Aleko* and a wide range of compositions as a



student earned Rachmaninov the Conservatory's Great Gold Medal, only the third in the history of the institution. The composer himself allowed only a few of his student works to be printed, but most of them were edited and published in the Soviet Union after World War II. All the early works reflect the stylistic influences from Tchaikovsky, Arensky and Taneyev. Within a few months of its completion, the vocal score of *Aleko* was published by A.B. Gutheil (later succeeded by Koussevitsky's Edition Russe de Musique) and the opera was premiered on April 27, 1893 at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, conducted by Ippolit Altani (1846-1919 alongside excerpts from operas by Glinka and Tchaikovsky. The latter was in the audience and was noted to have been quite taken by the opera. Tchaikovsky is known to have wanted to present it on the same program with his own *Yolanta* (premiered earlier, in 1892 with the *Nutcracker*) but died later that year. The orchestral score for *Aleko* was not published until 1953 by Moscow's *Izdatel'stvo Muzyka*, ten years after Rachmaninov's death. (The problem in our getting this score has already been referred to ) The next two performances of *Aleko* were by the Kiev Opera on October 18, and 21, 1893, with the composer conducting. Rachmaninov also conducted the St. Petersburg premiere of *Aleko* in April 1899 with Chaliapin in the title role. This performance may have been given as part of the centennial celebration of Pushkin's birth. Chaliapin appeared in the title role ten times in all up to 1921 and, after leaving Russia, adopted *Aleko's Cavatina* as his own signature piece in his concert repertoire. The last time that Rachmaninov is known to have conducted *Aleko* (also with Chaliapin in the title role) was at the Bolshoi on February 2, 1905. The program contained Act 1 of *Eugene Onegin* (the only time Chaliapin took this role), and the Inn scene (Act 1) from *Boris Godunov*.

Comparisons have been made between *Aleko* and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* with which it has occasionally been staged. *Cavalleria* had been put on by the Bolshoi in 1891 and 1892 (when Rachmaninov was working on his opera). There are parallels in the themes of gypsy life and Sicilian village life and crimes of passion, but musically there is nothing in common between the two operas. Whereas Mascagni's opera became a staple in operatic repertoire, *Aleko* despite its auspicious beginning and sporadic performances at the turn of the century, never did. However in 1899 Rachmaninov himself was beginning to show signs of disappointment with his opera. In a letter to Arensky (dated 17 April, 1899) he wrote of his intentions to forbid its staging. Chaliapin felt the opera needed a prologue and a second act and conveyed this idea to Rachmaninov, promising to play the title role should it be revised. But Rachmaninov, perfectionist that he was, felt the work was little more than a student effort and unworthy of him by the time he was accepted as a serious composer. In 1925, he is known to have remarked "I am ashamed to have written such nonsense". Considering Rachmaninov's own misgivings, his tendencies to reappraise early works, his fleeing Russia during the 1917 Revolution, and the attempts by the Soviet regimes to disparage his works and discourage their performance until they forgave him in 1939, it is no wonder that *Aleko* barely survived beyond the composer's death from cancer in 1943.

Other operas by Rachmaninov were an 1888 attempt, *Esmeralda*, based on Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*: left incomplete; *The Miserly Knight* (1905), a one act setting of Pushkin's poem; *Francesca da Rimini* (1905), one act, based on Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*; *Monna Vanna*, unfinished, Act I only (1907) after the play by Maeterlinck.

The background of Tchaikovsky's *Yolanta* and its position among that composer's operatic works will be explored in the next issue of *Entr'acte*.

## Notes and Reminders

Readers are encouraged to send in suggestions and comments to the editor.

Tickets to the Spring operas are now available. The performance dates, again, are Friday evening, April 28 and Sunday matinee, April 30



Volunteers will be needed during the several weeks before the performances for helping with set-painting and in the costume shop. Leave your name with **Mary Wall (338-2618)** if you can help with painting and with **Marlene Stanford (354-0600)** for costuming. They will be in contact with Margaret Wenk and informed when to call upon your assistance.

If you missed the February 20th meeting of the Supers please try to attend the one in March or early April when details for strike party, Supers Potluck, and other plans , etc. will be finalized before the opera performances.

If you cannot attend one of the opera performances, why not make a donation in amount of the ticket price (or more) to the Opera Theater Gift Fund. Mona Shaw (335-1667) can give you the information as to the specifics. Why not make a donation anyway, even if you buy a ticket? Think of it as the equivalent of taking a person, called "the Opera Theater" out to dinner. Surely, many of you have had a friend as your dinner guest at least once a year ?

**March dates to keep in mind:** March 3 (Friday), Kantorei, Clapp Recital Hall, 8 pm ; March 12 (Sunday) Chamber Singers of Iowa City putting on J.S. Bach's *Johannes-Passion*, Clapp Recital Hall 3 pm; March 13 (Monday) Ida Beam Lecturer, Michael Steinberg, Clapp Recital Hall; March 25 (Sat.) and March 26 (Sunday), Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*, Cedar Rapids Symphony, Paramount Theater, C.R.; March 31 (Friday) one-woman "opera" *Miriam*, dramatically performed by Abbie Conant, former first trombonist of the Munich Philharmonic--in Theater A, Theatre Arts Bldg., 8 pm

**Make Note:** The 90th anniversary of the School of Music will be celebrated by special events in the near future. Keep in touch and watch for announcements.

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